



GENERATIONS  
JOHN LAWSON



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# Dedication

For Jack & Portia & Eric  
& the me  
who came to be  
in their devoted company



# Generations

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Wow, my life, I

said, & my friend  
said, what? Get  
in the car,  
now, get  
into the car  
right now,  
& drive.

*for Creeley*

## Econo Lube

If only that afternoon at Econo Lube

if only he had settled

if only he had only sat there quietly  
and waited for the men

to finish oiling his car, the tall  
thick black man and the wiry white  
whose oil-slick shoe soles made them move so  
gingerly, like tired skaters walking, whose  
ginger movements should have warned him that the world  
is slippery cement—if

only he had sat in sacred silence out of doors and watched  
the clouds of march  
glide past in panoply of evening;

if only he had not spoken;

if only he had not spoken pleasantly, to ask  
what she was reading;  
if only he had seen that she  
was not the slightly pretty, average woman that he took her for;

if only he had not spoken to that woman, had not asked  
her: "What's your name?"

## Caving

*"Hymenaeus! Hymen! Io! Io! Hymen! Hymenaeus!"*

*- Catullus*

There yet, we're not  
there yet, we're not  
there yet, we're not

there. Suddenly the  
strangling passage opens, empties  
into soaring caverns.

A forest of stalactites  
and stalagmites closes ahead  
like rough, red teeth.

The drip of rain  
has slicked the floor;  
there is no footing anymore.

Somewhere far within the earth  
a pagan madonna sobs and howls—  
the wind, trapped in buried cathedrals.

The candle flicks: turn  
back, turn back, and when we reach  
the surface, don't you breathe

a word. Mark the entry to the place  
discreetly; cover it with secret moss.

Tomorrow and tomorrow, we'll return  
to worship in the wet, enclosing darkness.

## The Lust for Reality and After

“For God’s sake, let’s forget  
these silly frills and frips. Stand  
still, you wild, you dancing thing: wipe  
smile and color from your lips,  
and strip, and spread your yellow  
curls upon that pillow.”

But shortly, then, that stark  
reality of naked limbs  
akimbo in the winding dark  
gives way to satiated senses that  
reclothe the sprawling world:

the sleepy eyes that spy  
two luminescent mountains, each  
topped with a luscious cherry pie;  
recumbent nostrils that flare to catch  
aromas wafted from a moonlit beach.

## The Sea Is a Carnivore

We stand here together, you and I, and stare  
down these orange cliffs to see  
the sea, its churning,  
a hundred feet below.

Soon, too soon, I'll know  
your boundaries, precise, so  
neatly boxed and wrapped in orange  
paper and blue ribbon, topped off with a bow:

the touches and the words  
that please and do not please

I'll know, and acquiesce, and gently  
go back, lost inside my dreaming.

But for now, we stand together, watch, below,  
the driving, swirling tide  
swallow and release those two black  
boulders at the bottom—with what

violence it attacks, submerges, drowns,  
possesses them from every side.

## Grove

After the bulldozer carved this ground, the men all knew  
just where they stood: the mounds of raw red earth,  
the glint of sharp stones you could grab and throw

at anyone who disagreed.  
But now the trees

have come among us, quietly, like women, to shade  
and heal the broken soil, dropping abundant leaves and twigs  
layer after layer, building the soft loam where grass can grow,

covering the sharp and hard, smoothing off rough edges,  
sheltering the squirrel, the robin, and the thrush,  
whispering above like tender mothers: hush.



**Ode to a Cantaloupe** (w/ Scott Andrews)

Antelope can't  
elope.



## The Island

Those few years of nonobligatory sex  
became, in memory,  
a tiny, sunny island,  
lapped fondly by a vast, blue sea  
that stretches all the way  
to England, cold and oatmeal gray,  
where boys at boarding school  
must take their morning dips  
under the proctor's icy supervision,  
then, quick, jump out, quite  
blue about the lips,  
and dash to the drafty lecture hall  
still shivering.

## **After**

After the bills; after the routine work of the day;  
after dinner and the dishes, aprons hung behind the swinging door;  
after the kids' homework, their baths and bedside stories;  
after TV; after the solitary brushing of the teeth, ablutions  
while the other locks the doors, turns out the lights downstairs  
and comes back up, suddenly, across a space  
now mystical, unknown, each sees a lone, mysterious stranger,  
eyes full of that darkness, longing, pain, the kind to whom  
you'd offer, if you had it, a cup of steaming tea, a scone,  
a place at your table to sit and take a breath. But there is  
no cup of tea, no table. All you have, the only thing that's left  
to surrender to this haunted stranger is yourself.

## Aubade: For No One

Now we need not  
envy any more those giants  
of the ice-white screen  
their misters and their mistresses.

Exhaling smoke, lascivious, we lie  
and trespass at our will  
the long-forbidden real estate,  
violate the aromatic, sacred spaces,

laugh to think what Mom and Dad  
or God would say if they could see us  
naked in our crashing wave  
of brocade sheets with matching comforter.

Then, like roots tight intertwined,  
we dream what lips like these  
would be to kiss, come fifty years:  
flaccid, with no teeth behind.

So swiftly we make up our minds,  
each within the iron orbit of the bone,  
and wake to sunlight's steady glare  
between your taupe Venetian blinds.

We yawn and stretch, kiss  
one more time, then speak of where  
we two can go  
to dally over Benedictine  
eggs and cappuccino.

## The Theory of Sexual Reproduction

At a distance, the collision  
of two bodies, taste  
of lip on lip, the tang  
of two salivas, breaths exchanged,  
gasping, darkly needful, probing,  
moaning like a midnight wind—all  
become improbable; that solid bodies  
might have ever met and so  
transacted, and that  
the mystic third should only then  
congeal and separate, unmesh  
like curds from whey; and that all  
then should move away, vanish  
from the others' touch, remembered  
only, if at all, as moods or sunbeams,  
confections spun of thinnest air: this  
is the stuff of childish tales  
and undigested, drunken dreams:  
a doodled page from a madman's notebook,  
scratched upon at random, torn and tossed  
into a metal basket, prison-green.

Nothing of the kind has ever happened.

## Conception

You gathered with the others among the granite columns of the temple. Gradually, more and more came down: shepherds from the mountains, fisherpeople, farmers. Not one of them breathed a word, a sound. You knew what everyone knew—the odds, how long, how desperate. You waited together under the flat rock roof. No rations were provided; each day you allowed yourself a single big bite of the goat cheese you carried in your knapsack.

Outside, the days were densely overcast. Rain poured in through the open windows. Everything was damp. A smell of mold. At night, you slept on the floor in an inch, two inches of water.

Hoofbeats, at last; everyone rushed out for the command. You stood among the shifting crowd, shivering, and tried to wring the wet out of your jerkin. The commander had no word: with his baton, he pointed toward the valley, to the road beside the river.

Everyone swept forward all at once—no army, just a silent mass of bodies moving. You found yourself caught up, swept forward in the midst of them, jostled. No transport, no oxcarts, nothing. Everyone had to make it completely on their own. But many were too weak. Women and children began to fall, gasping, exhausted, and the rest of the herd trampled them.

Your own breath came in heavy pants, your body ached and finally went numb. Through sheerest luck, you didn't stumble. And when the unruly horde burst into enemy territory, archers were waiting, pikemen, cavalry. Showers of arrows fell among the crowd at random; the strongest warriors died, impaled on lances. The enemy, faceless on the hillsides, rolled boulders down. All of the weak and all of the outer ranks, unlucky, struck at random, fell in their thousands, their thousands of thousands.

But you and the others pushed on, for now you could see  
the object of it all, the golden citadel.

You marched: a blur of clashing swords and javelin jabs, bodies  
and pieces of bodies, a severed hand

that floated silent in the air; the crack of bone; a yell  
so hopeless it awoke you.

Yet, it was you, somehow, you and you alone, who cut your way  
into the courtyard, up the inner stairs,

through friend and foe to the top of that tower. And there, you  
unfurled the tiny banner your mother

had knitted. You stood on the golden battlement and gazed across  
the battlefield, gone suddenly silent:

out, across the fields, the deserts, the distant hills,  
the universe you, and you alone, amazingly, had conquered.

**Only Child**  
*for Holly Stevens*

By-  
product of an  
experiment gone  
awry.

Why?

What god  
or absence  
of a god  
deprives  
them always  
of the vision  
to abort  
the hopeless  
mission while  
they still can?

Too  
late; now  
here she stands.

## Generation

That time, half myth and half remembered, when  
she lay back, after, and, half breathless, laughed:  
“This time I think we did it; I think we made one,”  
he, head half buried in a foam-core pillow, wordless,  
admitted, reluctant, in his secret mind, that,  
though what we think we know is usually deranged  
by wishing or by fear,

he, in his heart, gazing up, now, sleepless by  
her sleeping, contained with her within  
the infinite, impenetrable darkness of that room,  
he felt it, too: a third presence with them,  
room within a room, like him sleepless, tossing,  
moving, gazing blind into that same and yet  
a deeper darkness.

And later, finally asleep, he woke again to feel  
the last, sere leaf of his own childhood,  
withered, barely clinging to a brittle, yellow stalk,  
tear off and blow away, driven by the wailing, aimless,  
arbitrary wind straight across the black-soil plains  
toward Lake Michigan.



## Smile

Standing on this soft, green knoll and staring down  
at the river as it winds among the trees and fields,  
I can only compare it to  
a smile, the way it gently curves and disappears.  
And yet I know  
if Yeats or Blake or Keats were standing here,  
none of them would see this river smiling.

I stand here squinting to see this little river  
as a great man would  
till Anna rings the bell  
to call me and the children and the cat for dinner.

## Subversion on Maple Avenue

When the Dingles moved their chests of drawers,  
their sideboard, every stick of furniture they owned,  
out of their perfectly adequate suburban house onto the lawn,  
the neighbors felt dismay, as if the Dingles  
somehow were enacting a sly parody  
of life and logic as everyone up till then had known it.

But when the neighbors heard through unofficial sources  
that the Dingles had been thrown into the street  
because they'd had a series of misfortunes, unforeseen expenses,  
and had therefore failed to keep up with their mortgage payments,  
the neighbors felt completely reassured  
and once again returned in comfort to their daily business.

## You & the Thunderbolt

When winter came and we started turning  
the thermostat all the way down at night,  
you asked me to draw a little picture.  
I drew a thunderbolt across a little piece  
of paper with my pen and painted it  
a watercolor orange.

Now, when you wake up  
at night and walk, naked, to the bathroom  
through the icy house, you carry my picture  
clutched in your left hand. I ask you why  
you never wear that tatty bathrobe, but you say  
my orange thunderbolt is all you need to make  
the deep cold bearable, even the frozen  
toilet-seat.

But something's eating at me,  
a fear without a name. I stare out of our bedroom  
window at the dark; around the globe, lightning  
strikes a thousand times a second. I resolve  
to paint another orange thunderbolt and hide it  
somewhere safe, a lock-box, fire-proof, buried  
in a drawer where you're sure to find it, just in case  
anything should ever happen.

## Skylight

Of course it would be square; of course  
the straight lines, primly intersecting,  
demarcate what is yours from mine,  
what is in from all we are excluding.

The bubble-arch of curving glass is framed  
in thin, blonde timber, floating through  
the bland, blind plaster of the ceiling.

The room beneath is orderly and yet  
disordered: an order of the arbitrary kind—

Great-grandmother's taste for quince,  
but only in a pie; the proofs that Grampaw  
actually deserved each penny of his millions.

Look up. Look out. The crimson clouds  
of dawn are rioting and burning down  
the ghetto that we've built around them.

## Climax

He lay atop her  
like a twisted stick washed up  
on a frozen shore.

“Go on and finish,”  
she said, and he said, “I did.”  
But he didn’t move.

At dawn, they bickered  
over soap. By dusk, they were  
there: Key West and Nome.

## Salad

The bowl  
is over  
ful of  
gods

carni  
val a  
bun  
dance:  
    suave

pep  
per, green  
and fili  
greed the  
lettuce,  
of a  
lighter green.

Jolly, jolly  
the red to  
matoes, no  
tum  
ble snap  
stick no no  
no be  
yond the  
pale of  
cucumber  
and onion.

The carrots  
gentle orange  
marks  
a continuity  
with the room's  
decor.

some  
thing will over  
flow this hap  
py bar  
carole, this  
dance  
of carnage  
in a bowl

to stain,  
perhaps,  
the wife's new table.

## A Bullet Made of Water

*"Shoot him 'fo' he run, now."*

- Junior Walker

It was a bullet  
made of water  
that coursed  
straight down her cheek  
and through my chest.

I fell then  
and lay for a long time  
knowing nothing. Hallucinations

drifted through me,  
happy visions, gentle sounds.

I was a fawn lying on a fragrant  
bed of pinestraw,  
nuzzled by its mother.

I was a boat of sturdy oak,  
kissed in rhythm by the frothing waves.

I was a jet so high above the earth  
I hardly seemed to move; the sun  
reflected from my polished metal.

And then I woke, the center  
of a pool of blood.

I tried to move, and then I knew  
how badly I was injured.



## Arizona

He washed his own mouth  
out with soap; he silenced himself  
for many days.

For months on end, she watched  
the long green shadow from her desk lamp spread  
and sprout a devil's horns.

Iguanas came by night to eat the lettuce in their garden.  
You could hear them out there, rustling.

Somewhere beyond the hill, a cowpoke  
sat beside the embers of a campfire, whistling to the naked stars.

Downstairs, at last, too late  
that night for anyone to hear,  
their goldfish named Napoleon  
leaped up and out and clear  
to swim ecstatically forever in  
the vast black ocean of thin air.

## Patrimony

The father of the liberated daughter  
educates her—unlike all previous generations—  
educates her, yes, to understand  
with what suave grace and self-assurance  
she can stand  
up on her own long legs  
and that she never need depend  
on any man  
for anything  
except, of course, her father.

## Meridian

*for Sarah Cornibe*

I finally got sick of hiding.

I ordered another pina colada  
and stepped into the blazing  
sunshine of your outright contempt.

I felt your x-ray eyes  
trying to burn through me.  
The heat on my skin felt good.

I spread my beach towel on the sand  
and slathered my skin with lotion.  
I stretched out and basked in your fury.

I came back day after day.  
Your hate was always there to greet me,  
reflecting off the emerald water.

The sand radiated your heat.  
Your anger almost blinded me,  
so I bought a pair of sunglasses.

I built up a tan. One day,  
some surfers mistook me for one of their own.  
My friends tell me I look great.

In the evenings, I sit on the patio  
drinking margaritas and listening to the waves,  
the palm fronds' whispers in the ocean breeze.

Then I go to bed and dream  
about your golden eye. I miss you.

## Rites of Evening

His body, slick as a seal,  
bobs among the playthings, purple  
whales and yellow boats.

The washcloth's pink darts in  
between the piggies.

The hair's a froth of suds where  
big fingers disappear to rub-a-dub,  
and then the douche of water pouring down,  
lets loose an avalanche of bubbles  
down the length of him.

Then the plug. He feels the tug  
of water swirling in a circle  
counterclockwise, north  
of the equator.

When the tub is almost empty,  
water comes back on, compressed

by hand, and sprays his naked skin  
with stinging jets, now  
warm, now chilly. He squeals each time  
until I say, "just one more time."  
"Mo' time, mo' time!" he always pleads  
even when the last time's over.

## Stalingrad

*"Ad bellum purificandum!"*

- Kenneth Burke

You thought you could make me spend  
so much I'd eventually give up  
my son, my only one, to you  
and your family's sweet  
mercies: After all  
they did to you;  
I know what they turned you into.

It's true: I started  
my career too late, my fatherhood  
even later. You may reduce my older,  
final self to wandering destitution. But

before I'll surrender my child, I'll fight  
for every inch of ground, each foot, each yard,  
each alley, every rooftop; I'll ship supplies by  
night across the blazing river, launch a thousand  
raids—on foot, by tank, and in the sky; I'll  
rally the entire nation. You may try....  
Go right ahead! Consider this an invitation  
to beat your head against the burning, broken stones

until your tears, your blood run dry. I'm  
crying, too; I'm bleeding; there's not  
one home between here and Vladivostok  
that hasn't sent at least one fine young son  
to war. And still they come, trudging in ragged  
columns from the fields, the factories, the villages,  
grimly dark against the snow, but willing  
to face the brutal pounding of the cannon.

Even if every valiant one must die,  
to be replaced by skinny pensioners and little boys

who in their turn will face the fire—  
even if whole generations offer up their lives, to be  
mourned hysterically and forever  
by grandmothers, wives, and children left abandoned

I pledge you this, you bastard:  
you'll never reach the Volga.

## He Will Be Waking

He will be waking  
now, or very soon,  
the frozen prairie sun  
exploding white beyond  
the water tower.

The child  
slips out of bed  
and over rental carpet, thin and white,  
to a door so light

a man  
could punch right  
through it with an open palm,  
could almost break it down  
by leaning.

The boy  
fiddles with the bright  
brass-painted knob before his face  
and calls: "Mama. Mama. Mama."

Sunlight  
through the blinds  
throws bars of black  
against a wall, pure white.

## Father Earth

A photograph has you  
sitting by me on the sofa, my arm around  
your shoulder, your head pressed into my side.

I was simply there, natural as the soil  
shouldering your burdens  
when you laid them down. Beyond

the window, elms and hickories,  
deep and thick and high,  
majestically extending shade,

century after century.  
But I...  
I disappeared.

The last time I came to you, you ran  
to me, calling, "Daddy! Daddy!" your arms  
reaching up to soar.

Which visit will it be at last  
when you cling to mommy's skirt and watch with wide and fearful eyes

bulldozers leveling the hardwoods, and,  
through smoke of burning branches, that strange

intruder moving toward you, strangely sad?



## 5th of 8

Let's see: this  
night, Wednesday night,  
as I rock you to sleep,  
is the fifth of eight.

I tried to arrive Friday  
in time to see you,  
but the flight was late.  
Even big boys like you  
have to be in bed by eight.

So: Saturday, Sunday,  
Monday, Tuesday, tonight;  
then tomorrow, then Friday,  
and last, Saturday night.  
At Sunday's first glimmer,  
I'll drive to the airport.

We rock in the dark, your heavy  
head on my shoulder.  
The warm weight  
of you rests upon me entirely.

I smell your sweet breath  
and listen to it, counting:  
Friday's the seventh,  
tomorrow's the sixth.  
Tonight, Wednesday night,  
is the fifth of eight.

## Prayer of the Absent Father

Comfort him, Queen; console  
my little boy so far away from me. Send  
your birds to flash through sunlight and to sing.  
Make the wounds that others carve  
into his flesh and mind  
open in my body and my brain, so  
he may be whole again.

## Here & Now

They tell me even  
if you lose  
completely, even  
if he's denied  
to you  
completely he  
will someday  
come to you  
someday looking  
for his missing  
half. But I  
don't believe  
in there or later—  
only always  
here and now.

## Burying the Twins

Over to the right, the trees, completely leaved,  
cast deep black shadows. The grass, unruly,  
still cannot conceal the truth: this ground  
is rolling, broken as the sea,  
as if it might reject, throw up again,  
the spoiled lives of the two stillborns  
furtively committed to its waves.

The man—the “owner”—drags the second toward the orange hole  
while mother, who lay beside her lost ones through the night,  
stands with front legs in the grave, her bovine will  
to share the journey with her calves, regardless of their destination.

The tractor, gray metal, chugs its guttural satire on all things mortal  
while flowers of the field, violet and yellow,  
riot in their ecstasy, oblivious beneath a livid sky.

Behind this small tableau, the whole world, soiled,  
ripples toward a blue horizon.

## Generation of the Thaw

These you see are men of winter, women  
of that god-forsaken prairie sod locked  
deep in ice, lost beneath the immemorial snow:  
perfection  
of their kind,  
they squint  
harsh eyes to the horizon, though they grimly  
know precisely what  
of solid earth, of sky steel-blue they might  
expect: no thing except  
the bitter slash of falling sleet,  
the prickled rime that rises in the night  
to cut poor, tender feet; but  
of warmth and comfort, only that small spark  
that frozen hearts may strike from one another in the prairie dark.

Now the freshets liven, wake  
In beds of long-forgotten streams, and out,

far out, where land rolls like a slow, slow dream

of ocean, you can spot

black soil, sodden with spring's melting, peep

skyward, through the blinding

blanket of pure white.

And these few stand in silence, walk

in their accustomed spaces, watch

but do not see, their flinty eyes attuned

to winter and the dunes of snow;

and where they go,

their children, and the children of their children's children—

none will ever follow.

## How I Decided to Change Career Tracks and Become a Cow

In Illinois, the cattle in the feedlots  
feed and feed out of sheer boredom.  
To crunch that grain between huge molars  
helps them to ignore their darkest  
cow anxieties:

from overcrowding in the pens  
from slipping on each others' shit with every step  
from not knowing anything of what's to come, not  
even that they don't know what.

Corrugated tin slaughterhouses loom in the background.

Back east in my apartment, meanwhile,  
my son's small ghost declares a hunger strike. His precise  
demands are vague  
but firm, completely non-negotiable. He assumes  
a lotus position on my bedroom floor,  
refuses to speak another word.

A sudden pattering, as of rain against the window.  
I throw the drapes aside, pull up the blinds,  
still screaming over my shoulder, "Eat, my son, or you will die!"  
Outside, dark phalanxes of wasps  
throw themselves, wave after wave, against my windowpanes  
as if demanding shelter.  
They feel the autumn coming on, and now assert  
their rights as individuals not to fall,  
paralyzed by cold, and freeze there on the frosty ground.

I check my balance: a dollar ninety-five.  
Frantically, I wonder how  
I'll pay the next month's rent just for myself,  
not to mention for my son's small ghost  
and eighty thousand angry wasps.

My hard and heavy feet tread toward the door.  
I'm trying to be careful, but swarms buzz up at every step  
and sting me anyway.  
As soon as I step outside, I slip on a pile of shit and skin my knee.  
I pick myself up, begin galloping.



**Jeremiad 2: You have denied your young the infinite**  
*for Ann Jabro and Ron Arnett*

You have denied your young the infinite  
pleasure of deprivation.

Things. Things.

For you  
it's always  
a matter  
of never  
enough, and  
yet, you  
are never  
empty.

Stick  
your tongue  
out after  
3 days  
without water:  
catch one  
drop  
of rain;  
savor of  
the snow  
a single  
flake.

## Parisian Scene

The pretty lady and her daughter  
stand on the bridge. The girl is growing up. Their laughter  
dances on the water. The mother  
speaks of her own steps into the world:  
that kiss; her silly broken heart; the boat  
with that boy bending to the oars  
that slid so easily across the glassy Loire.

I watch them, knowing  
that my son is growing, too—too soon,  
he'll ask, if only with his eyes:  
What should he say? To whom? What should  
he feel, and what expect?

A sudden wind sends grit and paper  
swirling down the avenue.  
The lady holds the wide brim of her hat  
with both hands. They bend  
and make their way across.

I won't know what to tell him.

## If You Wish to See Me

If you wish to see me, little man,  
find time in this life if you can,  
and disbelieve your Christian mother:  
after this life, there is no other.

## Venereal

Seen from the stern, above the churning wake,  
The mainland's green sinks among the waves  
As Susan sank from view so very long ago.

One idly dreams from time to time  
One day she'll reappear, transported, maybe,  
On a magic shell, modest blonde tresses half  
Hiding nipples the color of red coral.

Still, one learns to live whatever while  
With what's at hand and what's at eye:

The vast horizon, so far out of reach;  
The gulls that swoop and turn and cry,  
Torn between temptations: the contemptible  
Crumbs we toss them or the infinite sky.

## Incubus

Arlene had died, apparently.  
Nobody said so, but everybody at the party  
was talking about her sister Ruthie,  
how accomplished her Italian had become,  
how cute she looked with long blonde hair,  
and how she'd wowed La Scala.  
Ruthie. Little Ruth. I'd never even heard her sing,  
but when her mom came in, quite suddenly  
the chatting people parted like the sea,  
and I no longer felt my feet as they  
floated me over to her side.

"So where's that frumpy little housewife I once knew?"  
I said. "You must be working out. And look  
at this couture dress. My God, you're gorgeous."  
She nodded: "Jerry left me well provided for."  
"But that's been quite a while," I said, and she said,  
"Fifteen years—and each one felt like fifty."  
"But are you seeing anyone," I said, "now?" She laughed.  
"I tried once—got remarried; it lasted  
a couple of years. Poor guy!" She laughed again.  
"No man," she said, "could ever measure up to Jerry David."

I told her how great it had been to see her.

## A Burgher of Calais

*after Rodin*

The money that I made, I made  
When I was young because I had an eye  
For rules: which X should go with any Y  
To make a Z. My playmates fantasized  
Great armies in the clouds, while I  
Connected all things logically;  
I played the greater game; I worked my craft and duty.

But then the long years intervened;  
Affairs, well started, moved apace,  
And fruits of ample portions, time, and space  
Piled up, drew breath, and lived, as these, my daughters,  
Grown and gathered now to grieve each step, my measured pace  
Toward certain death.

The conqueror claims to spare the town  
If only I and these few more—the cream—  
Surrender these poor bodies, thence to scream  
Our lives out, flayed and knouted, dragged, then burned:  
A task much easier, in its way,  
Than picking out which hat or neck-ruff to adorn my aging face each  
morning  
Or deciding which game of cards the family and sycophants should  
play  
Through evenings interminably decorous. This day  
I see, at last, my duty once again. Once more, my step  
Rings solid on the solid earth. Unbolt the gate. I know my way.

## Testament

We spoke slowly, calmly, each in turn,  
In tones that grew more hushed as evening  
Bunched outside the windows: how, without him, none  
Would ever be the same: not cattle in the fields,  
Not the spreading fields themselves, not mountains, whose  
Sharp rising in the middle distance showed  
Where all extension ends and, beyond,  
Inscrutable beginnings.  
Yet we knew  
This conversation was the sort we'd learned,  
Perfected in the logic of his presence, and that, so,  
All would truly be the same as when he sat  
Among us, howsoever radically changed:  
Cattle, fields, mountains, windows, breath  
Of conversation, and we, the speakers ourselves, woven  
In a complex whole, embodying his resurrection and our own  
Even as the tomb held fast his bones  
And evening fell around us.

## Landscape with Headstone

*"Friend, I weep for a body."*

*- Ricardo Reis (Fernando Pessoa)*

You call this taking  
    care of someone? Someone  
        you love? That's  
a crate you're packing  
    her into. A crate. I don't  
        care how pretty  
the wood is, how  
pink the satin, plump the pillow. And then you—

dig a hole  
deep in the ground  
and place the crate  
with her inside  
down at the bottom  
and pile on  
mud and dust and gravel  
till the hole is full  
and more, until  
it makes a mound  
pregnant with her still  
down there  
in the dark.  
Forever.

What did she do? I have to know: what  
crime did she commit against you?  
Fed, and clothed, and washed. Wiped  
your mewling mouth, your infant  
parts, even to your uttermost asshole  
with a tenderness that you  
yourself will never equal.  
Bibbed, and burped, and cuddled:  
loved you—really. Made you live.  
That womb was your world.



And this is how  
you pay your owings?

Now you say, on further thought,  
maybe you'll burn her to an ash.

If you had perished at her breast,  
she would have carried you  
with hair askew and clothing torn,  
blaming God, imploring heaven,  
till either you awoke again  
or rotted to pieces in her arms,  
regardless of the others following  
with alien gesticulations, shouting:

"Dead! All gone,  
and never will come back!  
The one you love  
is dead and gone!  
Can't you see that?"

## Motherland

It is a thought that grew and grew for years  
as sure and slow as cowboys infiltrating west, at first,  
and then the pioneers,  
who hunted buffalo to eat  
and treated with the Indians  
and kept on moving, then  
the bluecoats, who slaughtered all to make  
the plains and rugged mountains  
echo, empty as a bullet casing, so  
that this slow train might one day chug the rails  
all that way back, from west to east, groaning, chuffing smoke  
until at last the weary messenger with the walrus mustache  
steps down from the Pullman, brushes  
off the dust and ash of that long journey, and leans  
to whisper what you always should have known:  
that by the time she dies, you must  
have found, or find among  
these pigtails, printed dresses, scabby  
knees and elbows, silly gigglers, that one  
who will be worthy of so great a treason: one  
who'll grow so tall in love—  
hard in discipline, sacrifice, and strong of arm enough—  
to bury her six feet under  
and bring you safely to another home  
infinitely west of San Francisco.

## Review

Eyeball of the deity, blank  
eyeball of the television screen that stares back into the room  
where all protective layers—clothing, ozone—peel away;  
gigantic suns that, naked, dance  
and smear their light erotically and swirl  
within the tiniest of pinheads lost within  
the tiniest of pinheads, etc.

Primum mobile, unmoving  
mover, pederast voyeur, you peeper at a peepshow that you made  
and set in motion, mechanical parade  
of puppets, wind-up figures, painted tin,  
stiff-legged, tormented by geometries, perfections  
spoken only, never seen.

Summer numbly follows spring; wave  
succeeds to wave; the howls and imprecations of the damned a yellow  
buzzing.  
What coma case could bear to watch this arbitrary sprawl spin on  
for even a single episode, let alone another season?  
Simon Cowell turns two thumbs down.  
Discriminating viewers change the channel or switch off.

## Homage to Shiva

The dark tide reaches out like a tsunami, suddenly  
overlaps the sunny villages, even hundreds  
of miles inland, with massed waters, irresistible.  
You think, "Of course, I'll swim." But it's not like that.  
The wave picks up everything: refrigerators, tires, tool sheds,  
shattered palms, roof-timbers, dumpsters, cars, and swirls,  
grinds you to pieces in the mix and flow before anyone could throw  
a rescue rope or reach a hand or foot from an upper story.  
The few, the safe, gather on the balconies, watching, just grateful  
to escape this time themselves, keeping their fingers crossed the old  
colonial hotel won't crumble down on top of them.

I wake from a dream in which my dead friend Joe  
wakes from his stonelike trance especially  
to send me his apologies for missing the birth of my daughter.  
Only I don't have a daughter, and now  
I'm too old, never will. Melissa: Melissa would  
have been her name, mellifluous and sweet as honey.  
Her faceless face, another casualty, floats by below, a yellow  
dandelion turned up toward the sun, toward this balcony where I  
stand, hypnotized, and watch the flow, the crush and drowning.

The dark tide reaches out, pulls in  
all that ever was  
and all that ever could have been.

Jai Guru Deva.

## 54th Birthday

Drifting in and out  
of sleep, I'm seven again,  
snoozing in the back  
of our old Studebaker.  
My father, his youth restored,  
is at the wheel. I know  
I'm safe  
and heading home.

## **Afterglow**

*for Pete Townshend*

Those from whom we came  
have passed on, now,  
as we are passing in our turn:  
ours the generation that urged our claim  
to bring a new awareness, and to burn  
all bridges to a sordid past—or someone  
claimed that for us. Now our flame  
gutters, barely bright enough to show  
that we were just the same as all the others.  
One last look; a rueful shrug, and  
off into the dark we go.









### About the Author

John Lawson was born in Richmond, VA and holds a B.A. from St. Andrews Presbyterian College, where he studied poetry with Ron Bayes and wrote and performed music with the legendary Phlegmish Collection. He is the proud father of Steven Thomas Lawson, and he currently teaches at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh.





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## Generations

"John Lawson's poetry urges us to have reverence for the red earth, the green knoll, and the half-myths of our memories. This is poetry that hurts and heals. Lawson takes us into the slippery, uncertain world of domestic love and battlefronts, a land of promise, delusion, regret and trespass. His poetry is especially strong in portraying the desolation of a father speaking to an absent child."

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"John Lawson's *Generations* comes at you with the finesse and bravado of an ace hurler in top form, mixing it up, dazzling batter after batter with the sheer range of his unpredictable arsenal: lyric ploy and play, heartbreaking narrative, the measured music of form - all of it, somehow, with an abiding sense of humor. This is a fine and ambitious first book."

Joseph R. Bathanti, author

*This Metal and Coventry*

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